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ABSTRACT

Job stress is an area of research in which the relationships among job stressors (characteristics of the workplace) and individual strains (responses of the individual worker) are explored. The uncertainty model of occupational stress proposes that the two uncertainties (of effort-to-performance or E-- P and performance-to-outcome or P--O) are intervening variables between some job stressors and individual strains. It is inherent in the uncertainty model that the two uncertainties can function as intervening variables between some job stressors and individual strains. Also, supervisory practices have long been thought to contribute to role conflict and role ambiguity, and the uncertainty model is therefore consistent with the proposition that conflict and ambiguity would be intervening variables between supervisors' styles and the uncertainties. This study examined these intervening various possibilities. Subjects were 106 employees of 260 (response rate was 41%) in 3 offices of a large accounting firm who responded to questionnaires measuring supervisory styles, job stressors, uncertainties, and outcomes. Overall there was mixed support for the uncertainty theory of occupational stress. Role conflict and role ambiguity were related to estimate effort-to-outcome and performance-to-outcome uncertainties in different, predicted ways. Supervisory styles tended to be less strongly related to the uncertainties than the role stressors were, and they also tended to be more strongly related to the role stressors than to the uncertainties. (ABL)

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Employee Uncertainty as a Factor in Occupational Stress

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Employee Uncertainty as a Factor in Occupational Stress

Introduction

Job stress is an area of research in which the relationships among job stressors (characteristics of the workplace) and individual strains (responses of the individual worker) are explored (consistent with definitions of stress by Beehr & Newman, 1978; McGrath, 1970). Role conflict and ambiguity are social psychological stressors that have long been of interest to job stress from an organizational psychology point of view (Beehr & Franz, 1987). After a national study of role conflict and ambiguity in the mid-1960's (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), many job stress studies focused on or at least included these stressors. So many studies have been done on them that there have been at least four review articles solely of research results involving these two stressors (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; King & King, 1990; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). The present study used these two "well-established" job stressors to examine an approach to job stress that proposes uncertainty as a critical component of the stress process (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985).

It has been suggested that there is a need for more theory-guided research on job stress (Schneider, 1985), and the uncertainty theory was employed for that purpose. A type of uncertainty derived from expectancy theory of motivation has been proposed as a key variable in much of the social psychological stress experienced by many employees. Specifically the uncertainty about or the perceived inability to estimate effort-to-performance (E-->P) and performance-to-outcome (P--O>) expectancies in the work place is thought to be an intervening variable between several more environmentally based stressors and individual

strain reactions (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985).

Employees of a big eight accounting firm were studied. Such firms present an image of high pressure, and there is some previous research of job stress among accountants. Impending tax deadlines have been found related to psychological strains among tax accountants (Friedman, Rosenman, & Carroll, 1958), and role conflict and role ambiguity were related to psychological strains among senior auditors in a big eight firm (Senatra, 1980). Furthermore, perceived uncertainty (measured as a conglomerate of items resembling E-->P, P-->O, and role ambiguity) has been shown to be negatively related to job satisfaction among the audit staff in two large firms (Ferris, 1977).

The uncertainty model of occupational stress proposes that the two uncertainties are intervening variables between some job stressors and individual strains. They are likely to be differentially related to several job stressors, including role conflict and role ambiguity. Specifically, role conflict was proposed in the theory to be more strongly related to E-->P uncertainty than to P-->O uncertainty, while role ambiguity was expected to be related about equally strongly to each type of uncertainty (Beehr, 1985). This was an explicit hypothesis in the development of the theory, and it was treated as one in the present study.

It is inherent in the uncertainty model that the two uncertainties can function as intervening variables between some job stressors and individual strains. Also, supervisory practices have long been thought to contribute to role conflict and role ambiguity (e.g., House & Rizzo, 1972), and the uncertainty model is therefore consistent with the proposition that conflict and ambiguity would be intervening variables between supervisors' styles and the uncertainties. The study therefore examined these intervening variable possibilities also.

Method

Sample

One hundred six employees of 260 (response rate was 41%) in three offices of a big eight accounting firm participated in the study. Their job categories and responsibilities were primarily of five types: tax (34.0%), audit (29.2%), accounting (19.8%), consulting (5.7%), and administrative 7.5%). On the average, they had been in their current positions (job tenure) for about 2.3 years and had been working in the firm (organizational tenure) for almost 3 years. Their average education was a bachelor's degree and at least some post-graduate courses. Their average age was 26.4 years, and about 58% were females.

Procedure

Employees received questionnaires via company mail from a contact person (a partner or his delegate) at each office, and they returned the completed questionnaires directly to one of the researchers at his university in a pre-paid, self-addressed envelope. They were anonymous.

Measures

The measures included supervisory styles, job stressors, uncertainties, and outcomes.

Supervisory styles. Four types of supervisory styles were measured: initiating structure, goal setting, problem solving, and feedback. Most of the supervisory style items were derived from published scales. In developing the supervisory style indices, items that might be related to uncertainty were first obtained from a large number of supervisor and leadership scales. Then six graduate students were instructed to rate each item on a six-point scale from very irrelevant to very relevant regarding the likelihood that the supervisory

behavior would lead to subordinate uncertainty. Items for which the six ratings summed at least to 27 were retained for use in the questionnaire. Twenty-seven was indicated by an average rating midway between the scale points labeled "slightly relevant" and "moderately relevant." If almost all of the items of a scale were rated 27 or more, the entire scale was kept intact for use in the questionnaire.

Initiating structure (M=4.19, SD=.74, alpha=.87) was measured by the mean of the ten initiating structure items of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ; Hemphill & Coons, 1957) plus three items intended to cover communication and clarifying use of resources based on discussions by Ashour (1982) and Klimoski and Hayes (1980).

Goal setting (M=3.91, SD=.96, alpha=.86) was the mean of the three goal-setting items of the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (MOAQ; Cammann, et al. 1979).

Problem solving (M=3.99, SD=1.07, Spearman-Brown reliability=.74) was the mean of the two problem solving items of the MOAQ.

Feedback (M=4.29, SD=1.12, Spearman-Brown reliability=.59) was the mean of two items: "My supervisor gives feedback on my performance" and "my supervisor corrects my mistakes when necessary."

Role Stressors. Role ambiguity (M=2.69, SD=.71, alpha=.86) was measured by the mean of 11 items, some of which were written specifically for the study and some of which were revised from sources such as Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) and Beehr (1976).

Role conflict (M=2.70, SD=.82, alpha=.73) was the mean of seven items, some of which were written specifically for this study and some of which were revised from sources

such as Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970).

Uncertainties. The effort-to-performance uncertainty measure (M=2.62, SD=.83, alpha=.84) was the mean of ten items, five of which were adapted from Beehr's (1987) effort-to-performance uncertainty scale and five from Pardine's (1987).

The performance-to-outcome uncertainty measure (M=2.27, SD=.84, alpha=.89) was the mean of ten items, four of which were adapted from Beehr's (1987) performance-to-outcome uncertainty scale and six from Pardine's (1987).

Outcomes. Five outcomes were measured: global job satisfaction, facet satisfaction, somatic complaints, psychological strain, and turnover intentions.

All of the satisfaction items were measured on a six-point scale with labels ranging from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied." Global job satisfaction (M=4.73, SD=.92) was measured by one item: "How satisfied are you with your job as a whole?"

Facet satisfaction (M=4.61, SD=.63, alpha=.80) was the mean of 12 items written to measure satisfaction with 12 different aspects of the job (O'Driscoll & Thomas, 1987).

The somatic complaints index was the mean of responses to ten of the physical symptoms items from Belloc, Breslow, and Hochstim (1971), answered on a six-point frequency scale ranging from "never" to "continually." Respondents were asked, "over the past year, how often have you had any of the following," and example items were "tightness or heaviness in your chest" and "pains in your back." The mean was 2.04 and the standard deviation was .63. There is little reason to expect the different types of somatic complaints to be strongly intercorrelated, but the alpha was .79.

Psychological strain (M=1.87, SD=.50, alpha=.88) was the mean of the twelve-item

version of the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972), as revised for use on a Likert-type scale by Banks, Clegg, Jackson, Kemp, Stafford, & Wall, 1980.

Turnover intentions were measured by the mean of three items ($\underline{M}$=2.92, SD=1.48, alpha=.94) adapted from several indices in the turnover literature: "Thoughts about quitting this job cross my mind," "I plan to look for a new job within the next 12 months," and "How likely is it that, over the next year, you will actively look for a new job outside of this firm?" Each had its own six-point response scale: "never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often, all the time;" "strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree;" and "very unlikely, moderately unlikely, somewhat unlkely, somewhat likely, moderately likely, very likely," respectively.

The correlations among all variables in the study are in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Analyses

The hypothesis about the relative strength of relationships of role ambiguity and role conflict with the two uncertainties (E-->P and P-->O) were examined by testing the significance of the difference between correlations with non-independent samples (e.g., McNemar, 1969). Hierarchical regressions holding job tenure constant (by entering it first) were used to examine the possibility that the two uncertainties could fully account for the relationships between role stressors and outcomes. Finally, hierarchical regression, holding job tenure constant, was used to examine the likelihood that the two role stressors could fully

account for the relationship between supervisory styles and the uncertainties.

Results

Inspection of Table 1 indicates that the uncertainties tended to correlate more strongly with the stressors (especially role ambiguity) than with the outcomes or strains. They correlated especially strongly with role ambiguity, and among the outcomes they correlated especially with the two satisfaction measures. Among the four supervisor styles, they tended to correlate a little more strongly with goal setting than the others. The E-->P uncertainty tended to correlate more strongly with the role stressors, while the P-->O uncertainty tended to correlate more strongly with the supervisors' styles.

The hypothesis that role conflict would correlate more strongly with E-->P uncertainty than with P-->O uncertainty, while role conflict would not show such differences was supported (role conflict r's were .45 and .27, difference $p < .01$).

After holding job tenure constant and entering the uncertainties, role ambiguity and role conflict were expected to account for little or no additional variance in the outcomes, especially the outcomes traditionally considered to be "strains" (physical complaints and psychological strains). This only appeared to be true for global job satisfaction, however (Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

As expected, the contributions of the supervisor styles to the uncertainties were reduced to zero after the entry of the role stressors (again holding job tenure constant; Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

Overall, there was mixed support for the uncertainty theory (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985) of occupational stress. There were basically two types of analyses, those examining theoretical (usually job stressors) causes of the expectancies and those examining their theoretical consequences (usually individual strains).

Job Stressors as Differential Predictors of Uncertainties

The most specific hypothesis derived directly from the original presentation of the theory was supported. That is, role conflict and role ambiguity were related to E-->P and P-->O uncertainties in different, predicted ways. Role conlfict was more strongly related to the E-->P uncertainty than to the P-->O uncertainty, while role ambiguity was not. When role senders relay unclear messages to organization members, these members can become uncertain regarding both how to direct their efforts to obtain good performance and what outcomes might be forthcoming if performance is good (Beehr, 1985; Beehr & Bhagat, 1985).

Role conflict, on the other hand, consists of members of a role set sending the employee multiple messages about what behaviors are expected of him that cannot easily be complied with because some of them are incompatible. If the employee could meet all of the demands, he or she could expect to receive the promised outcomes (i.e., low P-->O uncertainty), but it is uncertain how to direct his or her efforts in order to meet conflicting demands (i.e., high

E-->P uncertainty).

Future Research on Job Stressors and Uncertainties. Along these lines, future research could examine still other organizational stressors as potential precursors of these uncertain expectations. The original development of the theory proposed more such relationships than could be examined here (Beehr, 1985). Role overload, for example, was expected to work much like role conflict, of which role overload was originally considered a sub-type (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinne, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). That is, it was expected to affect primarily the E-->P uncertainty.

Underutilization of skills, on the other hand, was proposed as a predictor primarily of P-->O uncertainties. If one has more skills than the job requires, one should be certain that he or she could perform it if he or she tried. One specific type of outcome might be uncertain in the P-->O expectancy, however, and that is the intrinsic outcomes usually described as a sense of achievement, pride, and so forth. Without some challenge in the job, it is less certain that good performance on it will lead to this type of intrinsic outcome (Beehr, 1985; Beehr & Bhagat, 1985). Furthermore, job insecurity or loss was proposed to be most closely related to the P-->O uncertainty, with the uncertain outcome being a steady job, while lack of participation as a stressor has been predicted to lead to both types of uncertainties (Beehr, 1985). Future research could examine these potential sources of the uncertainties.

Supervisor Style and Job Stressor Combinations as Predictors

Although not as explicit in the uncertainty theory, it was expected that supervisory styles could be a precursor of the job stressors (role conflict and role ambiguity), which in turn, would lead to the uncertainties. With some exceptions, the supervisory styles tended to be

less strongly related to the uncertainties than the role stressors were, and they also tended to be more strongly related to the role stressors than to the uncertainties. Furthermore, the results of the hierarchical regressions were consistent with this possibility. All of this was consistent with the predictions, supporting the idea that supervisory styles could lead to the role stressors directly but to the uncertainties only indirectly (i.e., through the role stressors).

Future Research on Job Characteristics and Uncertainties. Broadly speaking, supervisory styles could be considered characteristics of jobs (although they are usually categorized as leadership variables in the organizational sciences). It is natural to expect that other job and organizational characteristics could also lead to uncertainties through their effects on stressors. Job stressors themselves can be considered only a special category of job characteristics. but it is easy to imagine that some job characteristics could lead to others.

House and Rizzo (1972) had proposed and found support for the proposal that some supervisory behaviors (leader structure and standards setting, supervisory supportiveness and team orientation) could lead to role conflict and ambiguity. They also proposed and found support for a few other types of job or organizational characteristics as precursors of these two role stressors, including organizational formalization, planning activities, provision for horizontal communication, selection based on ability, adherence to the chain of command, organizational emphasis on personnel development, and organizational tolerance for error. Future research could examine these and still other potential precursors of role stressors (or other job stressors) in conjunction with the uncertainties.

Uncertainties as Intervening Variables between Stressors and Strains

While the data were generally supportive of the uncertainty theory's proposed predictors

of the two types of uncertainty, they were not very supportive of the theorized role of the uncertainties as intervening variables between role stressors and individual outcomes. This intervening function of the uncertainties is important in the theory, and the lack of support for it calls for more research, improved measurement, and theory development. Role stressors appear to be able to lead to strains independently of their effects on the uncertainties.

Future Research on the Intervening Role of Uncertainties. Several avenues for future research on uncertainty theory (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985) appear viable. This is only the second known study on the theory. The first, by Pardine (1987), found stronger support for uncertainties as intervening variables than this study did. That study some of the same and some different items from the present study in measuring uncertainties. One possibility is that the measure in that study was more accurate than the present one. The previous study examined stress among a sample of full-time employed evening students in a conglomerate of jobs, whereas the present study employed a more definable and delimited sample of job types. This also could be a reason for the difference in results.

Overall, the present study supported some aspects of the uncertainty theory better than others. Considering that the only preivious study tended to support the parts of the theory not supported here, replication seems to be the most obvious approach for the immediate future. Continued emphasis on development of measures of the uncertainties seems warranted. It is probably too early to abandon or drastically alter the theory base on empirical results, however.

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Table 1
Correlations Among All Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Uncertainties													
1 E-P													
2 P-O	59**												
Job Stressors													
3 Role Ambiguity	61**	52**											
4 Role Conflict	45**	27**	55**										
Supervisors' Styles													
5 Initiating Struct	-19*	-30**	-49**	-44**									
6 Goal Setting	-31**	-43**	-61**	-39**	71**								
7 Problem Solving	-19*	-25**	-42**	-40**	66**	66**							
8 Feedback	-23**	-34**	-47**	-26**	60**	69**	61**						
Outcomes													
9 Facet Satisfact	-31**	-52**	-53**	-32**	46**	54**	44**	41**					
10 Global Job Sat	-45**	-42**	-43**	-31**	29**	40**	40**	38**	64**				
11 Psychological Strain	25*	24**	38**	35**	-38**	-35**	-31**	-27**	-50**	-50**			
12 Phys Complaints	08	07	18*	25**	-18*	-17*	-19*	-14	-19*	-20**	49**		
13 Turnover Intent	34**	23**	40**	36**	-26**	-35**	-41**	-37**	-56**	-71**	45**	18*	
14 Job Tenure	-24**	-21**	-23**	-06	09	12	09	-05	27**	16*	-18*	-18*	-12

*p < .05 **p < .01 (Decimal points were omitted to save space)

Table 1
Correlations Among All Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Uncertainties													
1 E-P													
2 P-O	59**												
Job Stressors													
3 Role Ambiguity	61**	52**											
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6 Goal Setting	-31**	-43**	-61**	-39**	71**								
7 Problem Solving	-19*	-25**	-42**	-40**	66**	66**							
8 Feedback	-23**	-34**	-47**	-26**	60**	69**	61**						
Outcomes													
9 Facet Satisfact	-31**	-52**	-53**	-32**	46**	54**	44**	41**					
10 Global Job Sat	-45**	-42**	-43**	-31**	29**	40**	40**	38**	64**				
11 Psychological Strain	25*	24**	38**	35**	-38**	-35**	-31**	-27**	-50**	-50**			
12 Phys Complaints	08	07	18*	25**	-18*	-17*	-19*	-14	-19*	-20**	49**		
13 Turnover Intent	34**	23**	40**	36**	-26**	-35**	-41**	-37**	-56**	-71**	45**	18*	
14 Job Tenure	-24**	-21**	-23**	-06	09	12	09	-05	27**	16*	-18*	-18*	-12

*p < .05 **p < .01 (Decimal points were omitted to save space)

Table 2
Hierarchical Regressions of Outcomes on Job Tenure, Uncertainties, and Role Stressors

Outcome	Incremental Variance Accounted For			Final Multiple R
	Step 1 Tenure	Step 2 Two Uncertainties	Step 3 Two Role Stressors	
Phys Complaints	.04**	.01	.08*	.37**
Turnover Intent	.02	.08*	.09*	.42**
Psychological Strain	.03	.08*	.14**	.49**
Global Job Sat	.03	.19**	.03	.51**
Facet Job Sat	.08*	.24**	.15**	.68**

*p < .05, **p < .01

Table 3
Hierarchical Regressions of Uncertainties on Job Tenure, Role Stressors, and Supervisors' Styles

Type of Uncertainty	Incremental Variance Accounted For			Final Multiple R
	Step 1 Tenure	Step 2 Two Role Stressors	Step 3 Four Supervisor Styles	
E-P	.06*	.28**	.02	.60**
P-O	.04*	.18**	.04	.50**

*p < .05, **p < .01